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Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food

Farm & Food Report

Communications Branch, Walter Scott Building
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Saskatchewan

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Log Number: 07-31-144
Week of July 30, 2007

ARE TREES THE NEXT CANOLA?

At Prince Albert's Saskatchewan Forest Centre, the future is one in which we can see the forest, and the trees. The centre is working on research that may one day create an agroforestry industry that parallels our current conventional agriculture sector.

"We are optimistic that there will be new developments which will make trees a viable choice among the options in the farming system," says SFC Business Development Manager Doug Currie. "It is reminiscent of the evolution of canola or pulse crops. When you look at the acreages in production of those crops today versus where we started, and how long it took, 20 years doesn't seem like a long time."

The 20 years Currie refers to is the current production horizon for hybrid poplar, the most common farmed tree species.

"If we could get the 20-year horizon on poplar down to 18 or 15 years, there would be a substantial change in the economics," says Currie. "The economics we've studied suggest that, looking back at the past 25 years, a producer could make more money in poplars than in wheat."

The Saskatchewan Forest Centre was created as a non-profit corporation in 2001. Its mandate is to promote the acquisition, creation and dissemination of knowledge to expand Saskatchewan's forest industry in a sustainable fashion.

The centre's core approach is to create partnerships that allow knowledge and technology to be brought to Saskatchewan and made available to companies and producers in the agroforestry sector. The SFC recently received a $100,000 sustaining grant from Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food.

"We are an organization that is partner-based, and we have leveraged the partner expertise to improve our ability to bring technology here for producers," says Doug Currie. "Our focus is growing trees on farms, to make money."

Currie cites partnerships with groups like the University of Saskatchewan, the PFRA, the Saskatchewan Research Council and Ducks Unlimited as the kind of relationships that allow the SFC to foster scientific co-operation and information exchange on agroforestry to the benefit of Saskatchewan.

(more)

"We jointly released a strategy on agroforestry with the university," says Currie. "It outlines the steps we believe have to happen to move the industry forward, including more dedicated research and development programs focused on the commercial aspects of tree production."

Currie says Saskatchewan enjoys one huge advantage over most jurisdictions looking at commercial tree production: available land mass.

"You've got relatively low land costs, and competition for land is less," says Currie. "Around any given point where a production facility is located, if, within a hour's drive you plant two per cent of the land to trees, you can support an engineered wood plant. That might mean an industry creating 100 to 200 local jobs."

In addition to farming trees for wood, new markets are opening up to use agroforestry for the production of biomass to create energy, and as a highly efficient carbon sink for the emerging world trade in carbon credits.

"Trees will sequester the equivalent of as much as five to eight tons of carbon dioxide per acre per year," says Currie. "The value of that carbon sink could make the difference in the early years of a tree operation by providing some cash flow."

The Saskatchewan Forestry Centre is currently associated with approximately 50 demonstration sites of tree farming throughout the province.

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CANOLA POWERS SASKATOON TRANSIT SYSTEM

After a two-year test project, the Saskatoon Transit System has decided to convert all of its buses to biodiesel fuel created with Saskatchewan canola oil. Effective this summer, all 112 buses in the fleet are running on a one percent blend of canola oil and diesel. Saskatoon Transit Manager Jeff Balon says they began exploring the conversion out of concern for the environment.

"At Saskatoon Transit, we pride ourselves on being stewards of the environment," says Balon. "We realize that conventional diesel is not a renewable resource. There are some products out there that were worthwhile exploring."

The initial study was funded by Western Economic Diversification Canada, the Saskatchewan Canola Development Commission and the Canadian Canola Growers Association. Over a two-year period, a team headed by University of Saskatchewan engineering professor Barry Hertz studied the impact of using biodiesel in four City of Saskatoon buses.

The study concluded that, over the two-year period, using biodiesel instead of conventional diesel had reduced fuel consumption by three per cent, reduced engine wear on the test buses by 20 per cent, and provided a seven percent decrease in the amount of greenhouse gases emitted by the buses.

Transit buses are very long-running vehicles, expected to log close to 1,000,000 kilometres during their operating life. A major overhaul of a bus motor costs an estimated $30,000, so the engine wear reduction is seen as an important means to reduce maintenance.

"The biodiesel provides extra lubricity for the engines and reduces engine wear, a major cost item for us," says Jeff Balon. "All around, it's a no-brainer; it's a big winner for us."

Saskatoon becomes the first jurisdiction in North America to convert its entire transit bus fleet to biodiesel, and they've sparked the interest of transit systems in Regina and Edmonton, as well as the Canadian Urban Transit Association, the national group representing all transit systems in Canada.

It's no accident that the biodiesel being used in Saskatoon buses is supplied by Milligan Bio-Tech, based in Foam Lake.

"We always look for local suppliers," says Jeff Balon. "Why wouldn't we support our own farmers and industry?"

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With the initial study in the books and the decision made to go one percent biodiesel, what's next?

A further study to test a five-per-cent blend in four new buses.

"We've ordered two hybrid diesel-electric buses and two brand new conventional 40-foot diesel buses, to compare the use of the five-per-cent blend," says Balon.

The latest study will take about a year, before a decision is made about increasing the biodiesel blend for the entire fleet.

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NEW LEADER IN PLACE FOR SASKATCHEWAN MEAT PROCESSING INDUSTRY

Thomson Meats, the home of the Saskatchewan Toll Processing Centre, now has a new CEO in place to help advance its operations and build the province's meat processing industry.

Paul Kowdrysh has been hired to lead the Melfort-based organization. Kowdrysh has had an active 20-year career developing and leading companies to profitability and success.

"Paul has worked nationally and internationally, really as a turnaround specialist helping organizations develop profitable ventures," said Catherine Folkersen, the Food Industry Unit Manager with Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food. "He's done that in Asia; he's done that in North America; he has a terrific resumé in this area, and we're feeling extremely fortunate to have him here."

Folkersen says it was more than just an exciting challenge that attracted Kowdrysh to Saskatchewan from Ontario. "He looked at Saskatchewan as a positive lifestyle change for his family, and decided that this was an opportunity he was interested in."

As the new CEO of Thomson Meats, part of Kowdrysh's responsibilities will be to increase the client base for the Toll Processing Centre, expanding the province's value-added meat industry at the same time.

The centre was established at Thomson Meats as part of the Government of Saskatchewan's $3.3 million Meat Processing Strategy, announced in 2005.

Folkersen says the centre complements other services that are available to individuals and businesses with an idea for a new food product.

"Getting into the food processing industry can be very expensive," she noted. "Our goal has been to help make that process a lot easier, a lot cheaper and a lot more feasible for people who want to take a raw commodity—grown or raised here in Saskatchewan—and turn it into a value-added product they can then market on the world stage."

Folkersen says the Saskatchewan Food Industry Development Centre in Saskatoon, established to help companies develop products and test them on the marketplace, is the first step in that effort.

If their idea is for a value-added meat product, the Saskatchewan Toll Processing Centre then provides them with the opportunity to have it processed into its final state without having to construct their own facility.

(more)

"It's a federally registered plant, where entrepreneurs can get their products processed at commercial rates. So, rather than having to build your own plant, you can have it done here and instead focus your energy on further developing your markets," Folkersen said.

"In this manner, you don't have to make the major infrastructure investment required to set up your own facility until you're absolutely ready."

Clients enter into a contract with the centre to have their products processed for a charge. Clients can provide the raw product to the centre if it comes from a federally registered facility, or the centre can simply procure it on their behalf. The client then arranges for the final product to be picked up when processing is complete.

Folkersen feels that Kowdrysh's hiring is the boost the centre needs to take it to the next level. "I think this is a great opportunity for Saskatchewan people interested in getting into the meat processing industry, because there's a very capable leader there," she stated.

For more information on the services of the Saskatchewan Toll Processing Centre, contact Thomson Meats in Melfort at (306) 752-2802.

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A SNAPSHOT IN TIME: ASSESSING YOUR PASTURE MID-SEASON

The health of your pasture is determined by its ability to perform important ecologic functions. The production of forage for livestock, the protection of the site from soil and water erosion, the cycling of nutrients and energy, and the capture and release of water are examples of the benefits a healthy pasture provides for society.

Maintaining a healthy pasture means sustainable grazing opportunities for producers. But it's not something producers can simply take for granted. They will want to monitor their pastures from time to time and conduct health assessments to ensure they are properly managing the land to achieve its full potential.

According to Jodie Horvath, a livestock development specialist with Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food (SAF), conducting a health assessment is like taking a snapshot of your pasture. It can help identify problem areas, such as patches of invasive weeds, uneven distribution of cattle throughout a paddock and damage to sensitive water sites.

"The first step in improving management is being aware of the issues," Horvath said. "This allows a producer to make changes while it is still manageable. A quick survey of your pasture tells how your management has impacted a particular site."

Take a closer look at your pasture. Are the types of grass you seeded present? In a tame pasture, you want the species you have introduced to be dominant. However, you can expect composition to change over time and with variable weather conditions. The SAF publication, *Field Guide: Identification of Common Seeded Forage Plants of Saskatchewan*, can help you identify the forage species that are in your pasture.

Take note of the weeds. What are they and how are they distributed around the pasture? Do you remember seeing them last year? Are they in solid patches or scattered throughout the field? Thriving weeds may be a sign that your seeded forage lacks the vigour to compete effectively against the weeds. Weeds are invasive by nature, so any bare ground provides opportunities for them to establish. Two SAF publications, *FAQ: Identifying Weeds (Broad-leafed)* and *FAQ: Control of Selected Weeds on Pastures and Hay Land in Saskatchewan*, can be found on the SAF website at www.agr.gov.sk.ca.

(more)

What do you see when you look down at the ground? The dead and decaying plant material from last year is litter. Litter performs an important function in your pasture by enhancing forage production through water, mineral and nutrient cycling. It protects the soil against wind and water erosion, and buffers against dry conditions by aiding moisture retention and reducing soil moisture loss.

It is important to monitor your pasture throughout the season, as well as from year to year. Identifying trends and patterns lets you know if the management decisions you made are working, or if you need to make some changes. For more information regarding the condition of your pasture, contact SAF's Livestock Development Branch at 306-787-9112 or your nearest SAF Regional Office, or visit the SAF website. You can also contact the Agriculture Knowledge Centre at 1-866-457-2377.

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GRANT ENSURES TESTING OF NEWEST GRAIN CROP VARIETIES

Saskatchewan producers will again have the opportunity to evaluate and compare the newest grain varieties for production on their farms.

This opportunity is made possible by an industry/government partnership. For the third year, Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food (SAF) has provided the partnership with a $100,000 grant.

An entry fee system is then used in which variety owners or companies with the distribution rights to a particular variety pay a portion of the cost of having the variety tested. The Saskatchewan Seed Growers Association (SSGA) also makes a financial contribution to the program.

The committee that administers the program is the Saskatchewan Variety Performance Group (SVPG). The committee is composed of representatives from organizations with an interest in providing variety testing information. Public and private research institutions conduct the testing and compile the data.

"The program creates a database providing producers with independent, comparative information on the varieties they grow," says Blaine Recksiedler, the Cereal and Organic Crops Specialist with SAF. "The published results, including data from the co-op trials (pre-registration), present information on yield and agronomics and on certain market-related traits valuable to producers. Comparisons are made to a commonly grown check variety."

"It has been indicated that producers value third-party variety testing as an important source of information when making cropping decisions," added Recksiedler.

Testing requires several steps. First, trials are conducted using uniform protocols and standard check varieties. Second, data are collected from as many sites as are available and statistically analyzed. Third, results are aggregated over a number of years and on an area basis.

Variety trials are designed to measure the yield differences that are due to genetic causes while minimizing variability due to non-genetic factors such as moisture, temperature, transpiration, weeds, diseases and pests.

SeCan Association will administer the funding for SVPG. As well, crop co-ordinators will manage the data and provide expertise in their respective crops.

(more)

The results of the testing are then reviewed by the Council on Grain Crops, which also updates disease and other agronomic information, and approves the data prior to publication.

Producers will be able to access this information in early January during Crop Production Week in the *Varieties of Grain Crops* publication, which is also found in *SaskSeed*, the SSGA's seed guide.

Crops in the SVPG program include wheat, barley, oats and flax; however, the SAF grant also provides support to organizations that are testing other crop varieties, including canola, pulses, winter wheat, sunflowers and canary seed. Variety information for these crops is also provided in the *Varieties of Grain Crops*.

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